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THE POINT OF AN EMPEROR'S JEST

BY DUANE REED STUART

Lampadius, who succeeded Symmachus in the prefecture of the city, entertained an exalted opinion of his own importance. Although the tart comment of Ammianus Marcellinus xxvii. 3. 5 smacks of the barrack-room, it nevertheless speaks volumes: homo indignanter admodum sustinens si, etiam cum spueret, non laudaretur, ut id quoque prudenter praeter alios faciens. As a typical manifestation of this official's egotism there is further cited his practice of tampering with the inscriptions of dead-and-gone emperors on buildings which he had undertaken to restore. He took the liberty of inscribing his own name non ut veterum instaurator sed conditor. Ammianus continues as follows: quo vitio laborasse Traianus dicitur princeps, unde eum herbam parietinam iocando cognominarunt.

Now a great man may be permitted to cherish a pet foible or two
velut si

egregio insparsos reprehendas corpore naevos.

Yet it is not helpful to a reputation to be listed under the same rubric as the unpopular Lampadius. Besides, Trajan is accused of playing fast and loose with an obligation which emperors no better than he or even worse by nature and by practice viewed seriously enough. Such Caesars as Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, Vespasian, Hadrian, and Alexander Severus within certain definite limits perpetuated the memory of former builders and thereby won the approval of historians and biographers.¹ It was a Domitian or a Commodus who succumbed to an overweening desire for self-glorification achieved at the cost of propriety and justice.² Therefore, if this tradition as to the policy of Trajan be trust-

¹The data on which this assertion rests will be found in two previous papers, viz. "Imperial Methods of Inscription on Restored Buildings: Augustus and Hadrian," *Amer. Jour. of Arch.* IX (1905), pp. 427-49; "The Reputed Influence of the Dies Natalis in Determining the Inscription of Restored Temples," *Trans. Amer. Phil. Ass.* XXXVI (1906), pp. 52-63.

²Suetonius *Domit.* 5: *Scriptores Hist. Aug. Commodus* 17. 6.

worthy, and if his conduct in this respect was of a piece with that of the two emperors last named, we find him—to say the least—in undesirable company.

The passage has been often quoted but apparently no one has been moved to dissent from its testimony. De la Berge¹ cited it as proof of the frequency of Trajan's inscriptions, but took no notice of the point which is so vital to the fair fame of the emperor—the direct accusation that Trajan stooped to unfair measures in order to attach his name to buildings on which rightly it had no place. Schiller,² who for some reason holds a brief to prove that vanity was Trajan's besetting sin, uses this passage to support his view. I must remark in passing that this is the sole piece of primary evidence in his favor which Schiller was able to cite from a literary source—a fact which certainly emphasizes the necessity of placing a correct valuation on the testimony of Ammianus. Liebenam³ bases on the passage a comment in which he contrasts the policies of Trajan and Hadrian to the discredit of the former: “Im Gegensatz zu Traian der überall seinen Namen verewigt hatte . . . liess sein Nachfolger die urspringlichen Widmungen selbst bei grossen Umbauten unverändert.”

I believe that Ammianus has given a distorted view of the matter and that consequently it is grossly unfair to draw any conclusion concerning Trajan's procedure from the passage. Because of the dearth of literary sources dealing with the reign of Trajan every scrap of evidence should be closely scrutinized and carefully weighed. It is, therefore, pardonable to go to some pains to set tradition right in regard to what may seem at most a flaw of minor import in the character of a great emperor.

In the first place, it will be generally admitted, I think, that the imputation which Ammianus brings does not agree with what we learn from other sources about the character and the conduct of Trajan. To be sure, Schiller, as I have said, will have it that Trajan was decidedly lacking in modesty. However, the argument of this critic fails to convince because of his evident determination

¹“Essai sur le règne de Trajan,” *Bibliothèque de l'école des hautes études* XXXII (1877), p. 3, n. 5.

²*Geschichte der röm. Kaiserzeit* I, p. 545 and Anm. 6 (Gotha, 1883–87).

³*Städteverwaltung im römischen Kaiserreiche*, p. 163 (Leipzig, 1900).

to shape every available piece of data to fit his theory. Some of the proofs by which he endeavors to substantiate his charge fall but little short of the ludicrous. It was no drastic innovation to apply to colonies and to legions the emperor's name. "Coloniae Augustae" were numbered by the dozen; there were "Augustan" and "Claudian" and "Flavian" legions before there were "Ulpian." The title *Optimus* was given by public acclaim several years before it was formally countenanced by Trajan as an official designation. The assumption of the name was due to popular insistence and not to imperial initiative. There is no reason to believe that the same circumstances did not hold good of the application of the title *Augusta* to Marciana.¹ It would seem that Schiller could scarcely have been serious in asserting that the over-redolent rhetorical garlands of the *Panegyric* give token that Trajan was very receptive of flattery. It would be almost as sensible to blame the passive subject of a *laudatio funebris* for the time-honored hyperboles of the eulogist.

If there is any virtue of Trajan that the sources unite in praising, it is his freedom from affectation. Champagny's characterization has scarcely been improved upon: "Nicht dass ihm an Hochherzigkeit und an einem gewissen Stolze gefehlt hätte; aber er zeigte seinen Stolz nicht in kleinlichen Dingen."² The *Correspondence* alone suffices to reveal his great common-sense and his total indifference toward the *inania honoris* in which Domitian had delighted. It is as unnecessary as it would be tedious to cite from Dio Cassius and from Pliny the many occasions on which his dislike of petty display had manifested itself. I wish simply to call attention to the fact that this same trait marked his attitude toward honorary inscriptions. Dio Cassius lxxviii. 7. 2 quotes with approval the modest phraseology in which was couched the inscription recording the reconstruction of the Circus Maximus. Trajan erected a structure more elaborate than that which had been damaged by fire in the reign of Domitian and materially enlarged its seating capacity; Pliny *Pan.* 51; *CIL.* VI 955. "So generous and high-minded was he," writes Dio, "that he

¹So Pliny *Pan.* 84.

²*Die Antonine*, trans. by Döhler, I, p. 49 (Halle, 1876). The original French publication is not accessible to me.

placed on the Circus an inscription to the effect that he had made the building adequate for the Roman people." Pliny has much to say about Trajan's grudging acceptance of architectural memorials. The emperor's name was to be emblazoned not on beams or stones but on the monument of everlasting fame. I quote a stock passage from the *Panegyric*, chap. 59: cum arcus, cum tropaea, cum statuas deprecari, tribuenda est verecundiae tuae venia. That Pliny's report of his idol's attitude is historically accurate and that the emperor consistently adhered to this modest policy down to the closing years of his reign is proved by Letter 25 (=Hardy 9) of the *Correspondence*: statuam poni mihi a te eo quo desideras loco, quamquam eiusmodi honorum parcissimus, tamen patior, *et seq.*

The portrait of Trajan that we derive from the sources thus suggests that he would have been the last man to desire to foist his name upon another's monument. By good fortune we have still stronger indication that in the restorations in which he engaged so actively Trajan conformed to the ordinary rules and avoided all false appearances. I refer to *CIL*. VI 1275: M. Calpurnius M. f. Piso Frugi pr. ex s. c. faciundum curavit eidemque probavit Imp. Caesar Divi Nervae f. Nerva Traianus Augustus trib. potest. xii imp. vi cos. v. P. P. operibus ampliatis restituit. From this inscription it appears that in the year 108/109 A. D. Trajan rebuilt an edifice erected at least a century before by a Calpurnius Piso.¹ In his dedicatory inscription the emperor kept the name of the founder and appended a record of his own restoration of the building. I have shown elsewhere² that there was no presumption involved in such a proceeding, much less any such usurpation of the sole right of inscription as that for which Ammianus reproaches Trajan.

How then may we account for the fact that Ammianus denied to Trajan admission into the company in which historically we should look to find him—i. e., in my category of "good" emperors? I use the adjective, of course, only in respect to the item of behavior with which we are here concerned. The complete

¹His identity is uncertain; cf. Drumann *Geschichte Roms*, 2te Auf., II, p. 543.

²*Trans. Am. Phil. Ass.* XXXVI (1906), pp. 54-57.

rehabilitation of Trajan, it will be seen, is simply a matter of explaining the joke to which Ammianus alludes, the point of which had in some way become obscure. From the *Epitome* of Aurelius Victor, 41. 13, we get additional information of value: hic (Constantinus) Traianum herbam parietariam ob titulos multos aedibus inscriptos appellare solitus erat. In the first place we learn that the original perpetrator of the *bon mot* was Constantine. Furthermore, the epitomist presents an independent and, in the light of what we have learned about Trajan, a perfectly reasonable version of the cause that elicited the epithet. The point of Constantine's jest in its original application lay simply in the fact that the inscriptions of Trajan were *conspicuous and numerous* in and around the city. Eutropius was not so far wrong when he wrote of Trajan *Brev.* 8. 5: orbem terrarum aedificans. It follows as a matter of course that the name of such an indefatigable builder was to be read on many edifices. In the Forum of Trajan, for example, there was inevitably constant reminder of the founder. Thus it came about that Trajan was dubbed "wallpellitory" by Constantine, who may have been frankly bored by seeing so frequently the name of his great predecessor, who may, like Constantius afterward,¹ have felt a very human chagrin at having, in comparison, no more architectural worlds to conquer, or who may have wished simply to turn a phrase.² However this may be, the quip tickled the popular fancy as the efforts of imperial jesters are forever doing. So often was it repeated that Ammianus' plural, *cognominarunt*, may be justified without a resort to that favorite hypothesis of the source-investigator, *nonnulli pro uno*.

This is the point, however, that I would emphasize: Underlying the nickname there was by no means the animus which Ammianus implies. Constantine's satirical comment was evoked merely by the frequency of Trajan's inscriptions and contains no allusion to any such titular forgery—if I may use the term—as that for which Lampadius was stigmatized. Trajan cannot be blamed for inscribing his buildings. Therefore the number of his inscrip-

¹ Amm. Mar. 16. 10. 15-17.

² Irrisor potius quam blandus: *Ep.* 41. 15.

tions varied directly as the number of his monuments. Ammianus read too much into the joke and erred in his application of it to the compromise of the good name of Trajan. Or it is possible that the sarcasm gained acidity in repetition and transmission so that what had begun as a humorous reference to the ubiquity of Trajan's inscriptions became a downright reflection on his generosity as a man and his sense of honor as a restorer. I trust that he has been vindicated.

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